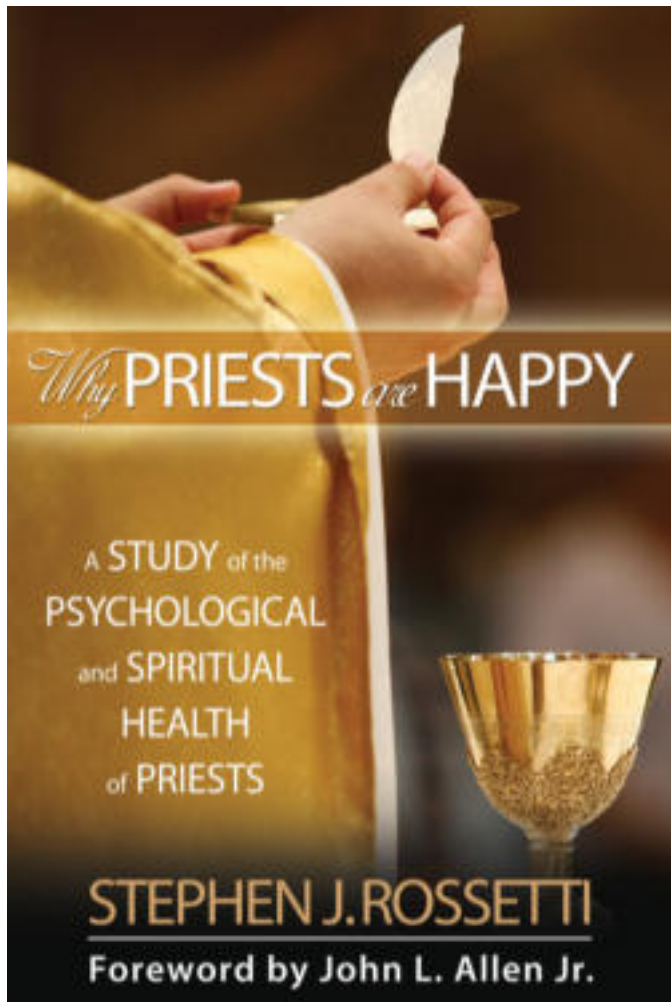


Study Finds that Most Catholic Priests are Happy and Appreciate Celibacy

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (Zenit.org) - Priests in general are among the happiest members of society, says Monsignor Stephen Rossetti, and contrary to secular opinion, most embrace celibacy as a positive aspect of their vocation. These were some of the conclusions outlined by Monsignor Rossetti in his book, "Why Priests Are Happy" (Ave Maria Press), which will be released Wednesday.

The author, who is currently serving as associate dean for seminary and ministerial programs at The Catholic University of America, also wrote "Born of the Eucharist," "The Joy of Priesthood," and "When the Lion Roars." As a licensed psychologist, Monsignor Rossetti previously worked as president and CEO of Saint Luke's Institute, a treatment and education center for clergy and religious.

The author surveyed 2,500 priests, and made discoveries that modern society might find surprising.

In this interview with ZENIT, he explained some of these findings, including the correlation between a priest's happiness and his relationship with God and others, and the signs of hope for the future of the priesthood.

ZENIT: Your research showed a conclusion that the public might find surprising: Priests are among the happiest people in the country. Why do we not hear about this happiness more often?

Monsignor Rossetti: There have been a number of studies in the United States over the last few years with exactly the same findings: About 90% of priests report that they are happy. In my study, it was 92.4%.

In a similar study, when the National Opinion Research Center recently conducted its scientific poll of 27,000 Americans, they found that clergy in general were the most satisfied and happiest of all Americans. This is especially remarkable since over 50% of Americans report being unhappy with their jobs.

But this consistent and astounding finding of priestly happiness remains a secret.

Why? First of all, good news doesn't make the news. Tragedies and scandals fill our front pages but the faces of our many happy priests do not. Second, and just as important, the secularization of our culture breeds a kind of negativism toward organized religion. There is a secular belief among some today that practicing the faith must be constraining and joyless.

Some modern thinkers suggest that the only way to true human happiness is to be freed from the constraints of religion. They see religion as repressive of one's true human freedom and humanity. Thus, using this logic, being a priest must be the unhappiest life of all.

Therefore, to hear that priests are among the happiest people in the country is met with disbelief.

The fact of priestly happiness is a fundamental and powerful challenge to the modern secular mind.

But for us Christians, it only confirms the truths of our faith. Jesus prayed, "That my joy might be

yours, and your joy might be complete."

Joy is one of the unmistakable fruits of the Holy Spirit. To be truly and fully Christian is to know God's gift of joy. The secular mind searches for this joy, but it is looking in the wrong place.

It only makes sense that those men who have dedicated their lives in the service of God and others in the Catholic faith as priests would be slowly and gently filled by God with an inner happiness and joy. Jesus promised us his joy and it is demonstrably true.

INTERVIEW WITH MONSIGNOR ROSSETTI

ZENIT: What have you found to be the key factors that contribute to a priest's happiness?

Monsignor Rossetti: I ran a multiple regression equation to find the most important variables that contributed to priestly happiness. The first, most powerful predictor of priestly happiness was the variable "inner peace."

Those who reported a good self-image and a sense of inner peace were the happiest of priests.

Upon reflection, this makes perfect sense. The most important predictor of anyone's happiness is what they bring to their jobs and their lives.

If we feel good inside, we are likely to be happy with what is around us. This also is a challenge to all of us: If we are unhappy with our lives, perhaps the place to begin is not to criticize what is outside of us, but to look within.

Interestingly enough, my research demonstrated that the most powerful predictor of inner peace is one's relationship with God. The correlation was a large $r=.55$, which is a very strong correlation in social science research.

So, where does inner peace come from? When one has a solid relationship with God, there is much inner peace. Jesus promised us this gift. He said, "My peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you."

It was exciting for me to see the truths of the Gospels displayed right in front of my eyes in these statistical findings. We find true and lasting peace only in God.

And, of course, one's reported relationship with God was strongly predictive of happiness as well. Again, there was a strong correlation ($r=.53$).

So we see our spiritual life as being a powerful contributor both to inner peace and personal happiness. If there is so much violence and unhappiness in our world today, where does it come from?

My findings suggest that we will never find the inner peace and joy that we are searching for until we find a personal relationship with God. Most of our priests have found such a relationship, and they are

happy men because of it.

ZENIT: Could you say something about the role of interpersonal relationships -- with family, friends, cohorts, or parishioners -- in a priest's happiness?

Monsignor Rossetti: There were several surprising findings in the research, which upon reflection, made perfect sense.

For example, I ran another multiple regression equation and asked what was the strongest predictor of one's relationship with God, that is, what variable most likely contributes to a positive relationship to God. The response was clear: having close friends (the correlation was a strong $r=.46$).

Developing a healthy relationship with others helps us to connect with God.

Many times Jesus himself spoke of love of God and love of neighbor as two sides of the same coin. Or, as the Scriptures tell us, "For whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."

And the statistical results confirmed this Gospel teaching: To love our neighbors and to build a charitable relationship with friends, family and neighbors helps us to love God, and vice versa. All of these are important in becoming happy people.

Isolation causes unhappiness. We are meant to be connected with others.

The good news here is that the vast majority of priests -- over 90% -- reported having solid friendships with other priests and with the laity.

One of the great joys and supports for the life of a priest is his connections with others. The secular notion that priests are lonely, isolated men is simply not true.

Indeed, priestly happiness has been rising over the past several years and will likely rise even higher. In my research only 3.1% of priests were even thinking of leaving the priesthood. Given the enormous pressure on priesthood today and the many real challenges facing these men, this is remarkable.

ZENIT: What about celibacy? How does it relate to a priest's happiness?

Monsignor Rossetti: This was also an interesting finding. Those priests who felt called by God to live a celibate life and who experienced celibacy as a personal grace, despite its challenges, were much more likely to be happy men. The correlation between this positive view of celibacy and priestly happiness was a strong $r=.47$.

The good news here is that over 75% of priests have found celibacy to be a positive part of their lives.

This percentage is likely to rise even higher in the future. It is the youngest priests who most strongly support mandatory celibacy.

So, contrary to a secular mentality, support for priestly celibacy will likely rise in the future among priests in the United States. It is disappearing as a "hot button" issue among priests in the United States.

But this is challenging. It is one thing to accept celibacy as a necessary part of a priest's life, but it requires a much deeper level of spirituality to experience celibacy as a gift from God and a personal grace. It requires a depth of living that is profound.

As I sit back and reflect upon the findings of this study, I find myself inspired by the commitment and spiritual vitality of these priests' lives. This is the real truth underlying the findings of the study: Our priests are happy and holy men.

Genevieve Pollock